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GOP seeks its revival in the revolt against Obama's healthcare plan

Party leaders want to turn the conservative activism into votes, but find themselves the target of ire from many of the protesters.

By Janet Hook and Peter Wallsten

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Reporting from Washington

Conservatives are calling it their August Revolt -- a surprising upsurge of activism against President Obama's proposed healthcare overhaul.

Spurred on by the success of their efforts to dominate the news at Democratic town hall meetings, conservative groups are reporting increases in membership lists and are joining forces to plan at least one mass demonstration in Washington next month.

But the conservative mobilization has also created an unusual dilemma for Republican leaders, who want to turn the enthusiasm into election victories next year but find themselves the target of ire from many of the same activists.

Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas), chairman of the GOP's Senate campaign committee, was booed at a "tea party" rally in July for supporting the government bailout of the financial services industry.

And one of the GOP's most reliable conservatives, Rep. Bob Inglis of South Carolina, was shouted down at a recent town hall meeting when he criticized a conservative broadcaster and tried to counter claims that children would soon be forced to receive swine flu vaccinations.

"You cannot build a movement on something that is not credible," said a frustrated Inglis, referring to the vaccine issue and other false rumors being spread by more aggressive critics of the health bill.

"Going door to door, I found opposition tending toward hostility," Inglis added. "At town meetings, the hostility went straight through to hysteria."

Some GOP leaders, such as former vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin, have tapped into the unrest -- with [Palin stoking fears](#) on her [Facebook page](#) of "Obama death panels" that would result from the healthcare legislation. That claim, too, has been widely discredited.

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Finding a balance

Others are still trying to figure out how to balance the desires of the base with the need to appeal to moderate swing voters who might be turned off by high-volume rhetoric. Whether they find that balance could determine whether the Republican Party can win back independents who voted overwhelmingly for Obama last year but now, according to several polls, are questioning their commitment to him.

The GOP might take comfort in a [new Gallup survey](#) that shows more than a third of independents who have followed the healthcare rallies in the news have gained sympathy for the protesters' views, and just 16% have lost sympathy for them. And 35% of independents [approve of Obama's handling](#) of healthcare policy.

But party leaders eager to win the middle have failed in recent years to appease the conservative base. Immigration reform, for example, proved to be a divisive issue for Republicans.

Complicating matters now is that some activists have mounted their effort against a healthcare overhaul largely outside the party machinery. They are relying on social networking websites such as Twitter and Facebook to recruit volunteers for town hall meetings and spread YouTube videos of encounters with lawmakers.

One new group, [Smart Girl Politics](#), has drawn more than 10,000 members using the networking site Ning.

"I don't know that anybody would want to be associated with either party at this point," said Michelle Moore, a suburban St. Louis business owner and mother of two, who joined Smart Girl Politics and has helped drive activists to four town hall meetings hosted by Missouri's Democratic lawmakers.

Anti-tax activist Grover Norquist, who for years has served as a moderator of sorts between factions of the conservative movement, called the new insurgency a "series of ganglia and nodes" that are all "fed up" with Obama but not unified around a particular leader.

"I think the Republicans need a year to put themselves in front of this parade," Norquist said.

There is some organization to the conservative agitation.

About a dozen groups, including the large and well-financed FreedomWorks, led by former House Republican leader Dick Armey of Texas, are sponsoring a march on Washington on Sept. 12.

Another longtime conservative group, the 60 Plus Assn., purchased a nearly \$2-million cable TV ad buy alleging that the Obama plan would put seniors' well being in jeopardy.

Republican officials hope those efforts will dovetail with signs of a party resurgence. GOP candidates are ahead in two closely watched governor's races this year in states won by Obama -- Virginia and New Jersey.

GOP fundraising, which suffered badly over the last few years, has also improved: The National Republican Senatorial Committee said its donor list has grown by 66,000.

Re-branding

Leaders are trying to re-brand the GOP as the party of fiscal discipline, fighting Obama on his economic stimulus plan, attacking his proposed global warming legislation as a massive tax increase, and portraying his healthcare agenda as a socialist takeover of the private sector.

But the newly energized grass roots don't appear ready to let Republicans off the hook for supporting recent government bailouts of automakers, banks and Wall Street investment giants, even if Obama and the Democrats were the primary targets for their anger.

When conservative Rep. J. Gresham Barrett (R-S.C.) addressed a mid-April anti-tax rally in Greenville, members of the audience booed and turned their backs to him. His crime against conservative orthodoxy: Barrett voted in late 2008 for the Wall Street bailout bill.

"I know you are mad," Barrett told the crowd. "I know you are frustrated and I hear it. You may boo, you may turn your back. But I have devoted my life for the conservative cause. We are fighting for you, and I will never turn my back on you."

Cornyn's status as a party campaign leader was no shield against catcalls at an Austin, Texas, rally sponsored by Americans for Prosperity, one of the conservative groups involved in the town hall protests.

Although he joined them in railing against "more spending and more government" in Washington, Cornyn was called a "traitor" and heckled throughout his speech to the Fourth of July crowd, apparently because of his support for the Wall Street bailout.

Another strand of the conservative movement burst onto the scene this summer at a town hall meeting held by moderate GOP Rep. Michael N. Castle of Delaware. He was confronted by a woman asking why Congress was not more aggressively pursuing claims that Obama was not born in the U.S. He drew a hailstorm of boos and roars when he insisted that Obama was a U.S. citizen.

Frontal assault

In many places, tensions between conservative activists and the party establishment has gone beyond catcalls to frontal political assaults. In Florida, conservatives have backed a primary challenge to Republican Gov. Charlie Crist, who is running for the U.S. Senate. He is viewed with suspicion because of his support of global warming legislation and Obama's stimulus plan.

In Indiana, even a Republican as conservative as Rep. Dan Burton -- a leader of the effort to impeach President Clinton -- is being opposed by several Republicans who say he has lost touch with the cause.

Inglis, who first came to Congress as part of the 1994 conservative class, now faces a primary challenge because of recent departures from party dogma on the Iraq war and some environmental issues.

After he was besieged by activists at this month's angry, unruly town meeting, Inglis sent the YouTube clip of the confrontation to his supporters and donors with the message: "This is what the opposition looks like."

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